



Vibrant Communities – Robust Region

Q&A

Q. What is "CONNECT Our Future: Vibrant Communities – Robust Region"?

A. "CONNECT Our Future" is a process in which communities, counties, businesses, educators, non-profits and other organizations work together to grow jobs and the economy, improve quality of life and control the cost of government. This project will create a regional growth framework developed through extensive community engagement and built on what communities identify as existing conditions, future plans and needs, and potential strategies. It is supported by a \$4.9 million HUD Sustainable Communities Grant and \$3 million in local in-kind public and private matching resources. The CONNECT Our Future three-year process will engage public, private and non-profit organizations across the 14-county region. It is based on, and builds from, the region's CONNECT vision.

Q. Why do we need a regional growth framework?

A. The population of the region is expected to grow by 50 percent in 20 years and double within 40 years. A regional growth framework will help us best utilize the limited resources that will be available for the infrastructure and systems necessary for growth. The CONNECT Our Future process will give us the opportunity to discuss how we want to address multi-billion dollar infrastructure investments and encourage existing and new business investment in our region. In similar collaborative processes, the Salt Lake City region identified \$3.5 billion and the Kansas City region identified \$2.5 billion in infrastructure savings.

Q. What counties are included in the 14-county grant area?

A. The grant area is the Greater Charlotte 14-county bi-state region which includes: Anson, Cabarrus, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly and Union Counties in North Carolina, and Chester, Lancaster, Union and York Counties in South Carolina.

Q. What is the region's CONNECT vision?

A. In 2005-2008, the 14-county bi-state region came together and developed a vision for the region's future. That vision has been adopted by local governments representing more than 70 percent of the population within the region. Its six core values are:

- A strong, diverse economy;
- Sustainable, well-managed growth;
- A safe and healthy environment;
- High quality educational opportunities;
- Increased collaboration among jurisdictions; and,
- Enhanced social equity.

Q. How would CONNECT Our Future support economic growth and jobs?

A. CONNECT Our Future would support economic growth and jobs by:

- Including business development strategies in community plans;
- Identifying and removing barriers to business growth;
- Aligning worker training and business/target industries;

- Developing strategies for growth around new/revitalized job centers; and,
- Creating strategies to revitalize commercial/industrial sites.

Q. How would CONNECT Our Future further support vibrant communities?

A. CONNECT Our Future will bring communities together to:

- Develop a "consensus-based" preferred growth scenario that addresses the shared values, concerns, and challenges identified by local communities;
- Develop tools and strategies to help address critical issues such as infrastructure investment, housing needs, air and water quality, and open space; and,
- Develop an ongoing system to collaborate and coordinate on shared problems.

Q. What is the structure of CONNECT Our Future?

A. The CONNECT Consortium – a broad-based group of more than 100 governments, businesses, non-profits, educational institutions and organizations – is responsible for guiding the work in the process. The Centralina Council of Governments (CCOG), which was the grant recipient on behalf of the Consortium, and the Catawba Regional Council of Governments (CRCOG) will coordinate, facilitate and staff the process. Extensive public engagement with more than 80 events regionwide is being designed to ensure communities and organizations of all sizes throughout the region, including traditionally under-represented groups, participate in the building of a regional growth framework.

Q. Where are the \$7.9 million in CONNECT Our Future funds coming from?

A. Of the total \$7.9 million, \$4.9 million is a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant program. The remaining \$3 million is an in-kind match being provided by various CONNECT Consortium members who are contributing time, expertise and other resources toward this project. The \$3 million in-kind match has already been committed by Consortium partners and does not represent a cost to any new organizations that are considering joining the Consortium.

Q. How is the \$7.9 million in CONNECT Our Future funds being spent?

A. The funds will be used to create a regional growth framework. Some of the elements that we expect to be a part of the framework include land use, transportation, housing, job creation and workforce training, energy efficiency, air and water quality, food systems, as well as other physical and social infrastructure within our region. In order for communities, businesses, non-profits and others to create a consensus-based preferred growth framework for the region, the funds will be used for:

- Public engagement forums throughout the process and throughout the 14-county region, to engage the communities, businesses, non-profits, other public and private sector organizations as well as the general public, in creating a regional framework.
- Technical studies to assess, problem-solve and develop strategies in areas of challenges facing the region such as the economy, housing, air quality, energy, food/agriculture and public health.
- Data collection and analysis including compilation of local land use and transportation maps and plans into a regional database; modeling and mapping software to project current land use trends into the future; identification of current trends, opportunities and challenges in the region; development of multiple regional growth scenarios based on local input and feedback; and analysis of how those scenarios impact the issues deemed important to local governments in the region.
- Identification of grant funding opportunities to support implementation and development of a framework for continuous improvement.
- Public meeting logistics, facilitation, and process communications.

The grant funds are received on a reimbursable basis, meaning, as work is completed to create the regional growth framework, they are reimbursed by HUD. The Sustainable Communities grant from HUD is not comprised of "pass-through" funds that are divided among communities, rather the funds are used for specific tasks and activities to help achieve the broader regional framework.

Q. How will the CONNECT Our Future regional growth framework be developed?

A. The three-year CONNECT Our Future process will only be successful if it is created through broad participation from communities including residents, businesses, elected officials, non-profit representatives and other stakeholders in our region. The region's public will help develop the regional growth framework in three different phases: identifying community needs, values and opportunities; creating growth scenarios for the region; and developing a consensus-based preferred growth scenario that will be developed into the regional growth framework. More detail will be available on this process as the project progresses.

Q. What are the key components in the development of the regional growth framework?

A. The three key components are:

Development of a "Base Plan" – This combines all local plans and other plans into a single comprehensive regional database of land uses, transportation facilities, public infrastructure, etc. Specific activities involve data collection for compiling plans, modeling and mapping; modeling software and configuration to support/expand on what the regional travel model does; more than 30 community-based workshops to gather input on solving problems shared throughout the region; public engagement to learn what's important to people in the region in order to select local community values that would be used to assess alternative scenarios; public engagement to actually build the alternative scenarios; and work to assess what it would take to achieve the scenarios that sub-regions and the region as a whole support.

Building an "Improved Plan" – Building an improved regional plan that incorporates specific problem-solving activities including the development of assessments and strategies in areas such as economic development, housing, food systems, energy, air quality. These are assessments of where we are now, how we can improve the current programs, and how we can create breakthroughs on difficult problems we've been trying to deal with for years, such as redevelopment issues.

Developing a Framework for Continuous Improvement – This is a framework for on-going regional problem-solving and general grants administration. This will incorporate much work with the Consortium to increase our capacity as a region for dealing with the issues that will arise in the future, as well as capacity-building for local governments and other Consortium partners. This phase will also include seeking known sources of funding that will be available in the future to help support implementation.

Q. What's the general schedule for the public engagement process for "CONNECT Our Future?"

A. The schedule includes:

Spring/Summer – Start-up, public engagement;

Fall/Winter 2012 – Public engagement, identifying measures of what's important to the people of the region;

2013-2014 – Public engagement, modeling and evaluating alternative growth scenarios, identifying a preferred scenario, development of a final regional growth framework, and next steps.

Q. When will sessions be held in my community or area, and who will contact us to set those up?

A. These decisions have not been made yet and will involve representatives from your community. However, more specific schedules will be available by August 2012.

Q. How is the CONNECT Our Future process being managed?

A. The entire process is operating using a project management system, with a full-time project manager. This project management system will be invisible to most participants but will help manage the complexity and time sensitivity of the work that must be accomplished in each of the project's phases.

Q. What kind of outcomes have other regions realized from collaborative planning?

A. Regions that have benefitted from collaborative planning include:

- Kansas City– region identified more than \$2.5 billion in infrastructure savings;
- Salt Lake City region identified more than \$3.5 billion in infrastructure savings;
- Sacramento region got the mix of housing they needed for their aging population;

- Chattanooga and Knoxville regions revitalized their urban cores;
- Birmingham region developed more affordable housing;
- Most regions realized reduced growth in vehicle miles traveled;
- All regions were able to more effectively use limited federal funds.

Q. What does it take to become a member of the CONNECT Consortium?

A. Organizations that join the Consortium will be asked to sign an agreement and commit to doing the following:

- Share data on existing conditions and future plans (e.g. land use, transportation, utilities).
- Appoint representatives to come to meetings and help guide and shape the CONNECT Our Future process.
- Help shape a future framework and tools to meet your community needs. Tell us the challenges your community faces and what you need.
- Get members of your community or organization to participate in public engagement throughout the process.

There is no financial cost and the commitment for the \$3 million in-kind match in local resources has already been made by a number of Consortium members. Any organization interested in joining the Consortium can schedule a brief presentation giving them an opportunity to learn more and consider a Consortium agreement.

Q. Have other cities received a HUD Sustainable Communities grant?

A. Yes. The grant awarded CCOG in November 2011 was one of 30 awarded nationwide as part of the 2011 Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This was only the second year HUD awarded the Sustainable Communities grants.

Q. Will my small community's needs be overshadowed by larger communities if I attend a public engagement event?

A. No, the process is being designed to make sure that does not happen. The public engagement meetings and activities will be held on a sub-regional level for local communities throughout the region.

Q. Why do we need to collaborate to face our challenges?

A. Many communities in this region currently face similar challenges, such as unemployment, housing needs, and a desire to attract and retain young people. By working together we can develop better solutions, align our strategies and resources, and build an even greater future for our own communities and our region.

Q. Why should I get involved? How can I get involved?

A. This is YOUR process. A collaborative success will occur only if businesses, governments, workforce, educators, non-profits, organizations and others work together on strategies for our future.

You can:

- Join the CONNECT Our Future Consortium – Schedule a meeting to learn more about joining the Consortium.
- Participate in CONNECT Blueprinting Process Public Engagement – More than 80 events throughout the region; more details in the coming months.

For more information contact:

Sushil Nepal, CONNECT Our Future Project Manager,
Centralina Council of Governments, (704) 372-2416, snepal@centralina.org